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ABSTRACT

Dramatic changes in the economic and political structure of the Czech Republic in recent years have challenged schools to transform themselves from closed institutions into open organizations that collaborate with families and communities. This study explored the questions: (1) Are changes in school/family relations really occurring? (2) What are the circumstances of these changes? (3) What might be blocking these changes? (3) What attitudes do schools and parents have about each other and the change in their relationship? and (4) What activities do schools perform to involve parents, and how do they perceive the possibility of applying other recommended strategies? The study employed a questionnaire of headmasters at 63 state basic schools (first through ninth grades) in Brno, as well as in-depth interviews, examination of documents, and observation. Findings include the following: (1) schools lack both effective forms of communication with parents and sufficient information about pupils' families; (2) economic pressure and lack of reliable information is contributing to low family participation in their children's education; (3) the school/family relationship declines in upper grades; (4) despite some initiatives, schools' attitudes to non-traditional ways of working with parents remain somewhat reserved; (5) the new emphasis on individualized contacts between schools and families may lead to a fragmentation of parents' participation, while formal representative bodies may become isolated from a majority of parents; and (6) schools' and parents' perceptions and expectations of each other are not very positive. Results highlight the need for better legislative and financial support of schools and more effort from both sides of the relationship. (Contains 20 references.) (EV)

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School/Family Relationships in the New Social Climate: the Case of the Czech Republic in the 1990's.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The school and the family were undergoing many changes reflecting transformation of the whole Czech society in recent years. The school was challenged to transform itself from an institution of a rather closed nature into an open organisation collaborating with other subjects of its local community. The family was empowered to step in school matters, to reformulate freely its relation to education and school, and also to build up collaborative relations with the school on an equal base. This way, ideas of decentralization and participation in the school management and governance started to influence the Czech milieu, too. Consequently, an importance of developing the school's horizontal relations has been emphasised.

This trend is coming in the era of dramatic changes in the economic life of the Czech society affecting both the school, and the family. This is accompanied by a change of a system of the school's financing. As a result, the school has gradually appeared at the market milieu competing for ever decreasing number of pupils (a demographic decline). The school's ability to act proactively in this situation is often weakened by losses in personnel (a direct as well indirect brain drain suffered many of the schools - mainly because of low teachers' salaries). There have also come about changes in pupils' groups the basic schools serve to. The basic schools are loosing part of their pupils after the 5th grade - having passed, they leave for the 8-year grammar schools (this opportunity was newly incorporated into the Czech school system after 1989). The latter strongly affects the level of school/family relations, as most of the parents willing to collaborate with the school leave with their children. The

school has never been challenged this way. It gains its experience in external relations' development mainly by a try-fail method. Hardly anybody or anything is helping the school to deal with the new situation and challenges more effectively.

On the other hand, although the recent legislation generously provided the parents with a relatively wide range of opportunities to collaborate equally with the school and other subjects of the local community, parents as a group have only started to constitute themselves. Moreover, a large part of parents' interest in the school matters has been strongly diverted from schools into the direction of economic needs and opportunities.

On the newly and strongly emphasised schools' autonomy are cast doubts, however. There are at least two main reasons for it:
1. entire absence of the conception of the educational policy (needed at least in an oulined way);
2. a low level of schools' readiness to carry and meet new competencies and responsibilities brought about by their autonomy.

In other words, the whole network of school system's bodies which should be of a help to schools and development of their own autonomy (the Ministry of Education, Methodical Centres, the LEAs, the School Inspection bodies, etc.) have failed. Schools live in the milieu of unspoken assumption that in "free market society" they have to be able to help themselves.

In our research we were focused on the question to what extent have the mentioned changes in the Czech society influenced the school/family relationships.

At the core of our research was a belief that there have

existed and to a certain extent still do exist barriers in communication between the school and the family. The barriers have been brought about by a lack of mutual trust and respect.

In our research we also spotlighted the question if the two sides concerned show efforts to remove the barriers and to develop effective mutual relations.

The aim of our research was to find out:

- if changes in school/family relations are really occuring;
- what are the circumstances of these changes (if they do occur);
- what would be contingent reasons for blocking these changes
- what attitudes and views towards parents and towards changes in school/family relationships takes the school up (both school management, and teachers);
- what attitudes and views towards the school and the collaboration with the school take the parents up;
- what activities towards parents the school performes;
- how the school perceives possibilities of applying other techniques and strategies recommended in various programs for school/family collaboration.

II. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

For collection and analysis of the data we used both quantitative methods (questionnaire), and qualitative approaches (in-depth non-standardized interview, analysis of the documents, and participating observation). We found a joint usage of quantitative and qualitative methods very much effective for the research in the field of school/family relations.

1. A questionnaire survey.

The questionnaire was submitted to headmasters of all the state basic schools (1st-9th grade) operating in Brno (63 schools). The rate of return was 68%. Out of those headmasters who returned

filled questionnaires we have fortuitously chosen two schools with which we stepped into a long-lasting contact. At these two schools we carried out a detailed qualitative survey.

2. Non-standardized interviews with headmasters of two chosen schools.

3. Our further steps were taken with regard to results of the first interviews (in order to saturate information from both of the schools):

- study of records regarding school actions aimed at parents;
- study of school documents (School Regulations, Work Plan for the 1993/94 School Year, Evaluation of the School Work in the 1993/94 School Year, Performance Assessment Standards);
- observation of ways of the school's daily communication with the parents (notice boards at schools, including the ones for the parents, a decoration of the school, a reception room for the parents and wider public, an access of parents to school, etc.);
- non-standardized interviews with deputy headmasters; educational counsellors; class teachers; representatives of the parents involved in some of the parents' bodies operating within the school; and ordinary parents;
- study of documents of the Parents Association at the schools concerned;
- observations at Parents Evenings, at Consultation Hours of the headmaster and class teachers, at the meetings of a parents' body.

4. Non-standardized interviews with participants of Brno basic school headmasters' meeting; participating observation at the same meeting.

5. Non-standardized interviews with the Brno School Board's representatives, and with the Chair of the School Inspection of

the Czech Ministry of Education.

III. MAIN FINDINGS

a) The Position of the School.

There can be identified several essential factors determining the school's position in the context of school/family relations. First of all, the school lacks effective forms of communication with parents. It does try to find and apply such forms, but this effort is often short of success. The school also entirely lacks feedback from the parents.

"We are missing the parents' feedback. The parents do not seem to criticise. They fear that it might have a negative impact on the teacher/pupil relations. This is still outlasting. We [the school] get informed about some things only after the problem has culminated" (the headmaster)

Furthermore, the current school knows less about families of its pupils and has got much less possibilities of obtaining sufficient information of this kind. The same problem faces the school in case of information about its pupils: unlike the recent past, there are very few records about a pupil, and almost nothing about a pupil's family available in the school today.

"Teachers should have the information about the families for the benefit of pupils, currently it is probably impossible to push it through legislativelly, though" (the headmaster)

At the same time, the parents are less willing to share, complains the school. As a result, the school is often shy in asking the parents for help (including the financial one) - the school has hardly any clue of what is the real situation in the family like. The school appears, though, in the situation when is has to be interested in every parent (and pupil), as it is financed by the formula funding principle - according to the number of pupils.

In general, the school have appeared in a very difficult situation (from the point of view of economics, law, school

maintaintanance and operation, etc.).

"We would like to offer the parents all sorts of things, yet the present financial situation forces us to increase the number of pupils in classes, to reduce the number of optional subjects and extracurricular activities, to decrease the time allocated for individual teaching subjects" (the headmaster)

There are many hindrances to an easy development of the school/family collaboration. With regard to the new situation, the school urgently needs to try to set up a mutually effective and benefitial collaboration, though.

b) **The Position of the Family.**

There is a lot of evidence that unlike formerly, the present family has little, if any, time for its contacts with the school. There is felt a strong economic pressure affecting many families. Moreover, the school has no power instruments to force the family to collaborate. By now, the families mostly do not exercise their right to communicate with the school and to influence its activities. On the other hand, the parents often tend to underestimate the importance of the basic school as well as the education itself (public opinion pools and other researches indicate as the main reasons of this would be a long lasting underestimation of the intellectual work in the Czech society). This can also be connected with the fact that the parents have very little information about the school and the teachers' work, and the information they do have is often distorted.

"The parents view a basic school as something that has to be completed by their child. Each of them is interested only in if their children' achievements are all right and if the teacher "suits" to the child. The parents come to meet only those teachers who seem to be problematic (from parents' point of view), that is all. They are probably not interested in the school's problems" (mother of the 6th grader).

"The parents mostly go to the school to show their interest in marks, less often they are interested in what their child has

really learned. In fact, they are only interested in their child's promotion to a particular type of a secondary school" (the class teacher at the upper grades of the basic school)

"A vast majority of people means that their involvement in the child's education which would exceed the limit of sending their child into the school and equipping him/her with the schools bag is not necessary" (chairman of the Parents Association at one of the basic schools).

c) The Development of the Quality of a School/Family Relationship in the Course of the Child's School Attendance.

The school/family relations undergo changes during the years of the pupil's school attendance. Starting with very close school/family contacts which last often during all the first five years of a basic school (an elementary grade), the school/family relations can be characterized rather differently (less frequent, close, and often also less effective ones) since the 6th grade. Who is to be blamed? Seemingly, both sides to a certain extent. A change of the nature of the school/family relations can be partly considered as a normal process reflecting the pupil's development and specifics of the work in particular periods of the school attendance, though.

School/family collaboration **during the 1st-5th grades** of the basic school is dominated by several main factors:

* There is one teacher per class for most of the time.
* The teacher knows well all the pupils and their parents.
* Both the parents and the child have prepared themselves for the child's entering the school (this step often brings great change in the family's life).
* The child mostly still has a positive relation to the teacher and the school.
* The parents understand what is their child learning at school and can be of a help to him/her.
* The child is still at a relativelly easily manageable age.

* It is not clear yet what results is the child to achieve in school (most of the children are not apparently excellent or problematic yet).
* The teacher can more easily provide the parents with an advise how to work with their child.

All the sides involved seem to be relatively satisfied yet.

A Different set of factors determines the school/family collaboration **during the 6th-8/9th grades** of the basic school:

* There are already many teachers teaching at one class (consequently there are less personal teacher/pupil relations, less teacher's knowledge of the pupil. Even the class teacher who teaches 2-3 subjects in his/her class, knows his/her pupils less, than did his/her colleagues from grades 1-5).
* The main motto of this period circles around good study and behaviour records enabling an access to a higher type of school.
* The teachers expect help from the parents in coping with the child's behaviour but the school/family relations are usually far not that close as before.
* The situation of the child in school is often rather stable, both the school and the parents know each other already, and they do not often feel the need of frequent contacts.
* School/family relations are often weakened by more successful pupils' (and often more active parents') transfer into the 8-year grammar schools.

All the sides involved feel that the mutual communication and collaboration have many shortcomings.

d) Activities of the School.

There is an evidence that traditional ways of school/family communication persist and some of the new approaches have

appeared to be applied (for instance, the schools have started to set up school journals and informative bulletines, organize Open Door Days, invite parents to classrooms, etc.). In general, the school's attitude to non-traditional ways of working with the parents is rather reserved, though. Success in working with the parents seems to depend on the school's understanding of an importance of the school/family collaboration and on the level of initiative the school is willing and able to bring into the whole issue. Existing legislation framework does not provide a fair ground for the clear assesment of the quality of the school's work, its external relations including.

e) **Activities of the Parents.**

The parents' participation in the work of the school has both individual, and collective forms. This participation is developed on the level of a classroom, or the school as a whole. Sometimes it exceeds the level of the school itself (Parents Union activities on the regional level as well as on the national level). The new era has brougth a lot of emphasis on individualized contacts between the school and the family. Aside from their apparent advantages they also can lead into a fragmentation of the parents' participation.

The parents can be formally represented in the school via the Parent-Teacher Association, Parent's Association, Boards of Governors, etc. Some of these bodies continue their work for decades, others have been set up just recently. In case of the formal parent bodies a potential problem lies in the fact that these bodies are the ones promoting a representative, rather than participative side of democracy. It brings about potentional problems of isolation of these bodies from the majority of

parents (or at least from many parents' groups).

f) Mutual Perceptions and Expectations.

It seems that problems of the school/family collaboration have also to do with the way both sides look at each other, and with expectations they have from each other. Each of these institutions does not often views the other side very positively. They reflect both prejudices lasting for decades, and many personal negative experiences. This could hardly be considered as a good platform for the development of more effective mutual relations.

Rather different role in the above mentioned could perhaps play mutual expectations the school and the family have from each other. These should be known by the other side and all involved should discuss them. It is not, though, taking place by now.

It seems that the parents mostly judge the quality of the school according to their children' performances. Very influencial is also the way in which a child presents the school and the teacher at home, the way the teacher treats the parents, and the way the teacher approaches problem solving. Only scarcely there has appeared an opinion that an effective interest in collaboration with parents is vital for a quality of the school's work.

The teachers, on the contrary, judge a quality of the parents' care especially according to a child itself: his/her behaviour, independency, way of dressing, level of preparation for the school, what level is he/she able to communicate at, how does he/she spend the leisure time, what are his/her interests/hobbies. Added to the above mentioned is a frequency of the parents' contacts with the schools, the parents' behaviour at

the Parents Evenings, and their willingness to help the school.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have found that the level of communication and collaboration between the school and the family is not very satisfactory one. The above mentioned premise about a communication barrier existing between the school and the family was not disproved by our findings. The schools are trying to change the situation, they are not always successful in their efforts, though.

There are also indications of the parents' interests to set up better contacts with the school. Less evidence about the efforts was found at the parents' side, though.

To a certain extent there have been altered the reasons spotlighting the dissatisfaction in school/family communication and collaboration. Among the main obstacles are outstaying, subjective and often not very positive judgements of the school (family) about the other institution. These can hardly be removed easily and quickly. There are also some objective factors influencing the current level of the school/family relations. They are typical for the after-1989-era. One of the main factors is a difficult economic situation of both schools, and many families which consumes too much of their attention, time, and energy. Consequently, there is a shortage of possibilities of getting involved in other activities (a collaboration with the family, resp. the school including). The school/family relations' development would be also helped by an establishment of a more appropriate legal framework. Finally, the schools are not supported sufficiently in their efforts to build up effective external relations by the Local Educational Authorities

(methodically, morally, financially), and other education service agencies.

We believe a change should occur on the level of individual contacts of teachers and schools with individual parents (the classroom level). It should also occur on the level of formalized contacts of the school with the whole group of parents represented by some type of "representative" parents' bodies. The parents' interest in their own child, his/her achievements and satisfaction in the school should be supported. A removal of prevailingly negative communication with parents (informing parents only about child's problems without paying attention to his/her positive achievements at school) could be the first step of setting up more open, respectful, and confidential relations.

Concerning the school's collaboration with parents as a group, more appropriate school/family relations' development is obstructed by unclear legislation, by relatively widely spread unwillingness of people to get involved actively in any collective body above the limit of their working duties (topped by bad experience with institutions), and also by almost non-existing parents' awareness of the rigths they might exercise as a group. Although most of the basic schools' headmasters think the initiative must come from the parents themselves, it seems that the school and other bodies involved in education could create more suitable milieu for this so that it can really happen.

There are some other ways of improving the school/family relations which cannot be executed by the schools themselves. Among them especially a change of the system of the school's financing would be worth mentioning. More finances in schools would also facilitate a richer curriculum - the factor highly

appreciated by the parents. The school should be given a bigger chance to get acquinted better with its pupils and their parents. Qualified support from the School Inspection, the Local Educational Authorities, and other state agencies would also be of a help for the school in its effort to develop more effective external relations.

There does exist an awareness of the need of collaboration with parents at the current Czech basic schools. It seems that currently the schools experience the phase of their gradual opening up, careful seeking for ways which would lead them to a closer connection with the parents. The latter, on the other hand, often seem to be still taking their "time off" after decades of an obligatory participation on the ideologized work of the school. Both sides, though, feel they would need to get more closely to each other - in the benefit of the pupil.

The problems of school/family relations are highly topical in the Czech milieu. That is why we find it urgent to pursue the research in this field.

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Summary:

The school/family relations have undergone dramatic changes within the last 6 years in the Czech Republic. These concern the very power distribution between the school and the family, the structure of these relations, as well as the challenges a new socio-economic climate brought both to schools, and to families. More than before the school and the family need to find ways of their collaboration. The search for these ways and their development is not easy, though. In this paper authors report on their research (carried out by both quantitative and qualitative methods) which was focused on the current state of basic school/family relations, possibilities and hindrances to their development, and desires and efforts of the sides involved.

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